

Greetings, Senator Kennedy, Representative Albis, and distinguished members of the Environment Committee. My name is Al Sylvestre; I am chairman of the Advisory Board to the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) division of the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS). I offer the following testimony in opposition to Section 6, subsection (e) of Senate Bill 1061, An Act Concerning the Fiscal Sustainability of State Parks.

In addition to putting three blind entrepreneurs out of business and out of work, enactment of Senate Bill 1061 as noted above will prevent any other client of the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind's Business Enterprise Program (BEP) from ever taking their place starting any other business at any DEEP facility or park. While that is not the bill's purpose, it will certainly be the result.

Enactment of SB 1061 will undermine the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act and its state-equivalent legislation. The passage of Randolph-Sheppard in 1936 gave blind people the opportunity to operate their own businesses, using their training, skills, and experience in food service and the sale of sundry items to reach their full entrepreneurial potential. Amendments made to the Act between the late 1950's and early 1980's established state committees of blind vendors to represent the interests of Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneurs in addition to granting them full due-process rights to settle disputes and grievances with the state. Amendments to the act also secured for Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneurs and their state licensing agencies the right to income from vending-machine sales on federal property. Connecticut's own so-called mini Randolph-Sheppard legislation gave the BEP and its blind entrepreneurs rights of first refusal to operate food service, vending, and sundry-item sales facilities on state and municipal public property.

Thirty-five blind Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneurs today provide quality food, goods, and services at public facilities throughout Connecticut. Many more have enjoyed the benefits of earning their livelihoods and satisfying their customers in the nearly seven decades the Randolph-Sheppard program has given BESB's clients the opportunity to thrive as independent business people.

As chairman of BESB's Advisory Board, I hope the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection will take the opportunity to reach out to the Department of Rehabilitation Services to work on improving the experience of people who enjoy visiting state parks rather than excluding the blind entrepreneurs who have enriched the experiences of so many visitors to our parks and facilities.

Thank you for considering my testimony.